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OF THE RAT PACK, ASHTRAYS, COCKTAIL NAPKINS, AND GRATEFUL LOSERS: THE MAKING OF THE LAS VEGAS EXPERIENCE AS A HISTORICAL PROCESS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how Las Vegas casino executives have successfully produced a unique gaming experience. From the 1950s onwards they were able to use architecture, entertainment and business practices to link games of chance with a specific consumption experience for players. It will examine what sets the Las Vegas consumption experience apart from other gaming locations, what it consisted of, and how it was produced by the casinos. It also investigates how people between the 1950s and 1980s perceived and consumed the Las Vegas experience. Drawing from these observations the paper argues that the special of Las Vegas in gaming history stems from the fact that it represented a unique way how games were experienced and played.

Keywords: Casinos; Casinos--history; Consumption (Economics); Entertainment; Nevada--Las Vegas; Gambling -- history

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For a historian, gambling represents an intriguing yet incredibly difficult challenge. In many cases, researching the past means finding and rediscovering persons, processes, and events that are either forgotten or who we, are more or less estranged from. Gambling however, is a difficult topic because it is found everywhere at any given time. Since the beginning of recorded history,

people have wagered on the outcome of games of chance. Yet playing those games could mean very different things for the persons involved. Gaming was always embedded in specific historical contexts that, in each instance, altered the playing experience. People have played dice for thousands of years, but they did so in radically different circumstances, spaces, and cultures.¹

Even the more specific form of casino gambling could be interpreted quite differently depending on the cultural background of the players who either participated in or witnessed it.

Although gambling has been a part of everyday human activities since ancient times, the experience of playing has been subject to radical change over the course of history. It is therefore not sufficient to look at the history of games in general; rather, we must pay closer attention to the ways gambling was contextualized, presented, and pursued at any given historical moment in order to do justice to the complex phenomenon of gaming.² For the history of Las Vegas, this point is even more important. Especially in the late 1940s and early 50s, the city represented a specific way of how games of chance were played, and how people would interpret playing them. Gaming here begun “feel” different from other places. If we understand a player as a consumer, then we can see that, although games were played here as anywhere else, with cards and dice, roulette wheels and slot machines, it was the overall context they were embedded in which infused the activity with a unique and special meaning for players.

Different Gaming Experiences

Until the mid-20th century it was considered bad form among players at Monte Carlo, arguably Europe’s most famous casino, to shout show too much emotion while playing. The Monte Carlo Casino was therefore dominated by the constant murmur of hundreds of people. While European players were used to that behavior, and therefor regarded Monte Carlo as an exciting place to gamble, their US-American contemporaries were surprised, frustrated, even appalled by the atmosphere of one of the world’s most famous gambling resort.³ One disappointed American visitor in the early 20th century even described Monte Carlo as a “mausoleum”, because the atmosphere at the casino was not as she pictured it. Gaming at American casinos was regarded as exciting and characterized by showing a great deal of emotion. American gamblers coming to Monte Carlo in the 19th century and for the first of half of the 20th often felt alienated, not because the games were strange to them, but because the atmosphere of the casino and the style of playing there did not appeal to them.⁴

On the other hand, it took some effort for the Monte Carlo Casino to adapt to the American style of playing. when an America journalist visited Monte Carlo in 1956, the casino was in the process of incorporating

craps into its repertoire of available games. Yet although the Monte Carlo Casino had an excellent staff and a good reputation, the favorite dice game of the US did not work there: “When this correspondent joined the half-dozen persons at the dice layout, the traditional cry of “baby needs a new pair of shoes” stuck in my throat. I slunk over to the roulette wheel and lost my money in aristocratic silence.”⁵

Apparently Monte Carlo stood for a specific way of playing games of chance, which was hard to combine with certain games and playstyles. This is important, because it reveals much about the significance of the contexts within which people played games of chance. Like Monte Carlo, Las Vegas was more than a mere location. It represented a specific consumption experience for games of chance. This experience did not grow automatically, but rather was carefully constructed and produced by various agents within the local gaming industry.

Producing the Las Vegas Consumption Experience

As various researchers have pointed out, Las Vegas defined American gaming in the post-war period. Although the gambling industry could be found all over the state of Nevada and expanded rapidly all over the US in the 1970s and 80s, Las Vegas remained the benchmark for casinos everywhere.⁶ This paper cannot investigate this complex historical development in its entirety, yet will offer some empirical evidence regarding how casinos conceptualized the Las Vegas consumption experience, and how visitors and players came to regard their activities in Las Vegas as a unique way consuming gaming services.

Since the 1940s gaming was at the center of as Vegas casino operations. After the relegalization of gaming 1931, a vibrant industry developed (or rather resurfaced) in the *Silver State*. Las Vegas became the hub of that commercial enterprise and the prime location of gambling in the post-war period.⁷ Casinos in Las Vegas were built as complex structures, featuring nightclubs, shopping, entertainment, hotel facilities and gambling in an almost hermetic space. This connection between gambling and other leisure activities had a very specific purpose: casinos, dating back to the 50s and 60s, were well organized businesses fully aware that they could not just offer gaming but had to construct an atmosphere around it. This atmosphere was designed not to hinder gambling activities, but to contextualize them in a hedonistic framework.⁸ It is true that Las Vegas casinos were also hotels and nightclubs, yet

these features served the specific purpose of enabling continuous gaming activities by the patrons on the premises, as well as infusing playing games of chance with specific meaning. The casino management had to carefully consider how much entertainment would be necessary to create a helpful atmosphere for gaming without distracting from it. It was with this calculus in mind that Al Freeman, publicity director of *The Sands*, wrote to then-president Jack Entratter in 1955 about a planned fashion show. He argued that as long as the show was held in the evening hours and didn't last too long, chances were it would attract people to the hotel and thereby eventually to the casino. He also reassured Entratter that the show would not distract people from gambling, a concern that had apparently been raised in previous discussions on the subject. This exchange highlights the fact that entertainment offered by a casino-hotel had hardly any value on its own, but rather was used to construct a context in which people could gamble.⁹ Even in the 1970s, when drastic shifts in ownership and new financing possibilities provoked important changes in casino architecture and many other aspects of the business, this particular strategy stayed the same. In an inter-office memo, Horst Dziura, Management Director of the Flamingo Hilton, laid out the agenda for the upcoming New Year's Eve celebration. Although the event was to feature a variety of activities, including fine dining and entertainment, Dziura made it clear to all departments involved that preference in service should be given to people whom management could depend upon to gamble heavily.¹⁰ This policy remained one of the basic principles of Las Vegas casino operations: entertainment and Hotel operations were supposed to keep people on the premise and provide them with an emotional atmosphere which elevated their gaming experience to something special.¹¹

This was also true when it came to the nightly. Las Vegas casinos were famous for their VIP-packed shows and revues. The city's resorts are to this day widely known for extravagant shows and productions, a cornerstone of their broad appeal to visitors and tourists. This was true in 1960 as it is today: the entertainment aspect of the Las Vegas casino industry remains essentially connected to the production of a favorable atmosphere for gambling. The various shows, from the big names in the theatre/restaurant to the smaller lounge shows, helped the casino establish the hedonistic and fun atmosphere so essential for gambling activities.¹² There was even a tight spatial relation between the entertainment facilities and gaming areas. The architectural plans of

various Las Vegas casino-hotels reveal that games were typically situated near the entrance, dominating the space people had to enter immediately after setting foot in the hotel. More importantly, both lounges and showrooms were near the casino floor and in many cases hardly separable from the casino areas. Casino architecture was designed to encourage fluid movement of people between casino and showroom, linking both in the perception of visitors. Remarkably, this remained one of the cornerstones of casino planning throughout the post-war period. By comparing blueprints and plans of casinos and their extensions from the 1950s to the 1980s, one can easily see that this particular feature stays a constant while many other aspects of the buildings changed.¹³ [insert example here!]

Las Vegas was accepted as "Entertainment Capital of the World" by the American public. Indeed, casino-hotels invested huge sums of money into their shows, often headlined by big stars. It would be wrong, however, to assume that casino executives made decisions about which entertainers to hire without reference to their gambling-focused business model. It wasn't just space that was used to connect gambling with a specific atmosphere, but also the performing artists within it. Vegas casino executives and PR-directors were fully aware that the acts had to appeal to their specific markets of potential gamblers. The goal was not to actually make money selling tickets to shows, but to use entertainment to support the gambling business by producing a specific atmosphere in the casino and bringing the right (meaning gambling) people onto the premises.

This is apparent in the choices casino executives made concerning the entertainment they brought to their establishments. The famous Rat Pack, a performance group consisting of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford, was the defining ensemble of the Las Vegas entertainment scene. Deeply connected to Vegas in the 60s, they became one of the most persistent elements in the Las Vegas image. Their close involvement with the *Sands* was due in part to their cultural significance. Their performances mirrored in a way the emotional state casino executives hoped to establish in their gambling houses: fun-centered, hedonistic, sometime childish entertainment loosely connected to heterosexual fantasies of middle class men, consuming alcohol, having beautiful women around them, and gambling as an exciting, but harmless activity. More important: The Rat Pack was deemed a good act for casinos because they seemed to encourage people to play games of chance. Sands executives

strongly believed that patrons seemed to have gambled more if the Rat Pack was around.¹⁴ Other musicians sold more records or tickets, yet the *Sands* cultivated the Rat Pack phenomenon because the shows supported the primary goal of the gambling house's entertainment activities.¹⁵

It is also instructive to note what kind of entertainment was not part of the Las Vegas consumption experience. Among the performers excluded were, first and foremost, rock musicians. Rock music, although a contested art form in the 1960s in the US, was firmly established in the music industry and culture of the contemporaries. Many insiders of the entertainment business, however, noted that the music that defined a generation seemed to struggle in the "Entertainment capital of the world". Its adaptation for Las Vegas was often difficult and casinos had limited interest in staging huge Rock acts.¹⁶ This may seem strange at first glance, but as previously discussed, every form of entertainment had a clearly defined function in a Las Vegas casino-hotel. Rock music did not fit the pattern: fans of rock, often imagined by gaming executives and promoters as rather young people, were not part of the market Vegas casinos wanted to appeal to. Due to legal age-limitations and their scanty financial resources, young people were not a gambling crowd, and thus not really welcome in Vegas. *The Flamingo* and the *International* were among the only casinos in the late 60s and 70s that made some effort to bring Rock music to Vegas. Yet the management's imposition of a dress code, among other limitations prohibited these events from becoming massive concerts, and ensured that only people with the necessary resources to play the tables would be admitted.¹⁷

Casino executives also actively battled efforts to bring Rock music to Vegas on numerous occasions. One noteworthy incident concerned Janis Joplin in 1970. Joplin had made plans to play the Vegas Convention Center, a cornerstone of the city's tourism business. While local promoters saw a chance to cultivate Vegas as a location for Rock music, and tried to boost business by appealing specifically to all the young people (that is, those under 21 years of age) who'd been effectively ignored by many casinos, executives like Jay Sarno, the man behind *Ceasar's Palace* and *Circus Circus*, vigorously opposed the event.. Sarno went as far as suggesting that Strip casinos should assemble a private security force in order to keep "disruptive elements" out of the city. Elements within the city government

tended to agree with the casinos, who saw little benefit in allowing artists like Joplin to play in Vegas if such concerts would not increase gambling business. This pitched casino owners against promoters in the music industry, as well as activists like Young People for Justice.¹⁸ The conflict was not resolved. The Convention and Visitor Authority, in close alignment with the casinos, allowed Rock concerts only under unusually strict limitations, a policy which alienated young people and local music-promoters alike.. In 1972, musician Alice Cooper chose not to perform in Vegas on account of burdensome regulations. ¹⁹ Though students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas organized to bring Rock music to Vegas, casinos remained uncooperative throughout the 1970s. Local Rock promoters like Mike Tell and KLUC radio station, as well as organized students of UNLV had a hard time securing help for their efforts in booking Rock shows in Vegas. Using their political and economic leverage, Strip casinos were able to ensure that entertainment in Las Vegas remained the means to an end; , namely, that of increasing gambling business.²⁰ The conflicts over Rock and Roll demonstrate not only the reason why certain music acts could prevail in Las Vegas while others could not, but also that entertainment in Vegas was part of a much larger issue. Offering gambling was not enough for casino executives. Throughout the post-war period, when Vegas truly became the symbol, benchmark, and pinnacle of American gambling, casino management actively produced this specific meaning of gaming consumption. Vegas' cultural and economic significance did not just occur. Rather, it was the result of a historical process, constituted by an industry's efforts to define and redefine their offered service by contextualizing it in a shifting matrix of space, emotions and practices.

"Las Vegas Nights": Consuming the Las Vegas Experience

Among other things, Casinos used architecture and entertainment to produce a Las Vegas-specific atmosphere for gambling, which altered the consumption experience of games of chance. How successful they were in that effort becomes more apparent through the letters people sent to the casinos on the Strip, in which they expressed their experiences and expectations.

Throughout the post-war years, but especially in the 1950s and 60s, people wrote not only an abundance of "Thank you notes" in which they described their Las Vegas experiences, but also asked management and the local Chamber of Commerce for objects connected to

Vegas. The “Thank you notes” written to casinos show how people who did not describe themselves as gamblers justified their gambling activity by referring to it as something special, and indeed a worthwhile experience. Furthermore, they oftentimes addressed their losses openly and with some humor. Gambling in Las Vegas was experienced as something special, a rewarding experience, which for many was removed from the morally questionable sphere it was usually located in.²¹ Vegas casinos profited from that immensely, as their business depended on grateful losers; that is, on people having a good time despite constantly losing money at the tables. Therefore, the production of the Las Vegas experience was aimed not only at encouraging people to play games of chance, but also at infusing those games with a specific meaning which apparently altered their perception by customers.

How profoundly Las Vegas casinos had come to define gambling in the minds of many Americans can also be seen in the phenomenon of “Las Vegas Nights.” Games of chance were often regarded as a traditional vice, connected to the dubious saloon or criminal activities. The Las Vegas experience has a profound impact on that image, as it served as new way to picture gaming. These “Las Vegas Nights” charity events, which occurred in churches and meeting halls all over the country in the 50s and 60s, allowed participants to gamble for a cause, using either play-money or real cash (subject to certain restrictions). The church-groups and charity organizations that hosted “Las Vegas Nights” often tried to recreate something like a Las Vegas atmosphere in order to elevate the gambling. To this end, they wrote various Las Vegas casinos asking for objects like promotional material, decks of cards, dice, whole gaming tables, and even cocktail napkins and ashtrays.²² The writers acknowledged that they wanted to recreate the Las Vegas atmosphere to make charity gaming into a special experience, but also admitted that they would not succeed in the endeavor: Las Vegas could not be transplanted. Yet the organizers of “Las Vegas Night” events thought that an object from a Vegas casino, any object, would help them approximate the special feeling gaming had in Nevada’s gambling hub.

The phenomenon of “Las Vegas Nights” is remarkable in itself, as it shows that, already in the 1950s and 60s, there was a distinct cultural meaning attached to the city of Las Vegas as a particular consumption-experience for gaming. Gaming was now not only acceptable but special, though only if it was somehow connected to Las Vegas, and only if that connection was signaled by the

use of something as concrete and specific as an authentic Vegas cocktail napkin. One case is quite interesting in that regard: Frank C. Randak, the Social Chairman of Alpha Ta Omega, wrote Al Freeman in 1957 to say that his fraternity was planning to have a “Las Vegas Night”.

“We have rented professional gambling equipment from a firm in Detroit at a cost of \$150 and we have done much research on gambling to help us plan the party well and give it an air of authenticity. [...] We can not duplicate the casino of the Sands Hotel [...] however, pictures, menus, matchbooks, and pamphlets from an actual casino would go a long way toward filling this gap.”²³

It is interesting how much meaning this fraternity gave to objects which were actually not important for the gaming aspect of their Vegas night. Gaming as an activity could apparently be transformed even by the loosest of connections to a real Las Vegas casino. Indeed, the demand for souvenirs in the form of decks of cards, napkins and dice was so high that even the *Sands* could not satisfy it.²⁴

The Special Place of Las Vegas in History

Las Vegas was and is more than a highly profitable location for casino gambling. Although betting on the outcome of games of chance has a long history, its meaning for players and consumers has differed radically over time. This has been due not only to differences in individual games throughout history, but also to the context each game was embedded in. Casino executives in post-war Las Vegas were so successful (as indeed they still are) not only because they provided a desirable service, but also because they cultivated a special consumption experience of gaming in their establishments. This did not just occur naturally. Rather, it was a process which was harnessed by various agents within the industry. Casino executives were fully aware that they could transform gaming experiences via architecture, entertainment and the way games were presented. This was a decisive development in Vegas history, as it explains not only the specific cultural meaning gaming acquired in that city, but also why certain business practices were adopted or discarded, and how the industry worked for many decades. It is also the reason why Las Vegas has a special place in gaming history: humans may have gambled for thousands of years on almost every continent, yet for the last five decades Las Vegas casinos have been able to define what gambling consumption is supposed to feel and be like. This fact offers interesting perspectives for

future research, as Gambling Studies have often called on the historical investigation of games of chance in their particular social and cultural context.²⁵ Far beyond helping us to gain a new perspective on the history of Las Vegas as a gambling location, this research can also connect that story with the much broader history of consumption in modern times. Since at least the late 19th century, consumption has been as much about the emotions, meanings and experiences connected to a good or service as it has been about the actual materiality of that service or product.²⁶ In this regard, the history of Las Vegas and its consumption experience can open up a fascinating aspect of this larger story.

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